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EXPLORING WRITING ANXIETY AMONG VIETNAMESE EFL STUDENTS AT A UNIVERSITY IN THE MEKONG DELTA: INFLUENCING FACTORS AND COPING STRATEGIES

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Abstract

Writing anxiety is a significant affective factor in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning since it can shape learners' perceptions of writing, reduce engagement with writing tasks, and influence the quality of written performance. Although writing anxiety has been widely discussed in EFL research, less is known about how Vietnamese EFL students interpret writing anxiety as a dynamic experience shaped by linguistic, psychological, pedagogical, sociocultural, and technological conditions. This qualitative study explores the factors influencing writing anxiety among Vietnamese EFL students and the strategies they use to cope with such anxiety. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with nine Vietnamese EFL students at a university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Cheng's (2004) L2 Writing Anxiety Framework was used as a sensitizing conceptual lens to guide the study while allowing contextual themes to emerge from the data. The findings show that students' writing anxiety was associated with linguistic challenges, cognitive and psychological pressures, evaluation and feedback, time and task demands, social and cultural expectations, and technological and digital factors. Students coped with anxiety through planning, emotional regulation, peer and teacher support, technology-assisted strategies, and reflective growth. Notably, several factors, including feedback, peer comparison, time pressure, and AI-assisted writing tools, functioned both as anxiety triggers and coping resources. The study highlights the need for writing pedagogy that addresses both the immediate emotional effects of writing anxiety and students' longer-term development as confident, autonomous, and ethically aware EFL writers.

Keywords: *Anxiety, coping strategies, influential factors, Vietnamese EFL learners, writing*

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LO ÂU TRONG VIẾT TIẾNG ANH CỦA SINH VIÊN: CÁC YẾU TỐ ẢNH HƯỞNG VÀ CHIẾN LƯỢC ỨNG PHÓ TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC Ở ĐỒNG BẰNG SÔNG CỬU LONG

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Tóm tắt

Lo âu trong viết là một yếu tố cảm xúc quan trọng trong việc học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ (EFL), vì nó có thể định hình nhận thức của người học về hoạt động viết, làm giảm mức độ tham gia vào các nhiệm vụ viết, và ảnh hưởng đến chất lượng bài viết. Mặc dù lo âu trong viết đã được thảo luận khá rộng rãi trong nghiên cứu, vẫn còn ít nghiên cứu làm rõ cách sinh viên EFL Việt Nam diễn giải lo âu trong viết như một trải nghiệm mang tính động, được định hình bởi các điều kiện ngôn ngữ, tâm lý, sư phạm, văn hóa-xã hội và công nghệ. Nghiên cứu định tính này khám phá các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến lo âu trong viết của sinh viên EFL Việt Nam và các chiến lược mà họ sử dụng để ứng phó với dạng lo âu này. Dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc với chín sinh viên tại một trường đại học ở Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long, Việt Nam, và được phân tích bằng phương pháp phân tích chủ đề. Khung Lo âu trong viết ngôn ngữ thứ hai của Cheng (2004) được sử dụng như một lăng kính khái niệm định hướng nhằm dẫn dắt nghiên cứu, đồng thời vẫn cho phép các chủ đề mang tính bối cảnh xuất hiện từ dữ liệu. Kết quả cho thấy lo âu trong viết của sinh viên có liên quan đến các thách thức ngôn ngữ, áp lực nhận thức và tâm lý, hoạt động đánh giá và phản hồi, yêu cầu về thời gian và nhiệm vụ, kỳ vọng xã hội và văn hóa, cũng như các yếu tố công nghệ và kỹ thuật số. Sinh viên ứng phó với lo âu thông qua việc lập kế hoạch, điều tiết cảm xúc, tìm kiếm sự hỗ trợ từ bạn bè và giảng viên, sử dụng các chiến lược hỗ trợ bằng công nghệ, và phát triển năng lực phản tư. Đáng chú ý, một số yếu tố, bao gồm phản hồi, so sánh với bạn bè, áp lực thời gian và các công cụ viết có hỗ trợ trí tuệ nhân tạo, vừa đóng vai trò là tác nhân gây lo âu, vừa là nguồn lực giúp sinh viên ứng phó với lo âu. Nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh sự cần thiết của một phương pháp sư phạm viết quan tâm đồng thời đến những tác động cảm xúc tức thời của lo âu trong viết và sự phát triển lâu dài của sinh viên với tư cách là những người viết tự tin, tự chủ và có nhận thức đạo đức.

Từ khóa: Chiến lược ứng phó, kỹ năng viết, lo âu trong viết, sinh viên EFL Việt Nam, yếu tố ảnh hưởng.

1. Introduction

The teaching and learning of English have become increasingly important in educational contexts worldwide, particularly in countries where English is positioned as a key resource for academic development, professional mobility, and international communication. In EFL education, writing is commonly regarded as one of the most demanding language skills because it requires learners to coordinate linguistic knowledge, rhetorical organization, idea development, audience awareness, and task expectations (Graham, 2019). Unlike oral communication, which may tolerate hesitation, reformulation, or immediate repair, written communication often leaves a visible record of learners' language use. For this reason, writing can make students feel more exposed to evaluation and criticism.

Affective factors play an important role in shaping students' experiences of writing. Among these factors, anxiety has long been recognized as an influential variable in second language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986; King et al., 1976). Anxiety may interfere with concentration, cognitive processing, and sustained engagement, thereby constraining learners' academic performance (Zheng, 2008). In writing classrooms, such anxiety may become especially salient because students need to generate ideas, organize them coherently, select appropriate vocabulary, use grammatical structures accurately, and respond to teachers' or peers' expectations (Cheng, 2004). When learners experience negative emotions during this process, they may hesitate, lose confidence, procrastinate, avoid writing tasks, or become overly dependent on external support (Gibriel, 2019).

In the Vietnamese EFL context, writing anxiety is a relevant concern because English-major students are often expected to demonstrate accuracy, coherence, and academic maturity in written English. Previous studies have reported that Vietnamese students experience difficulties in writing and that anxiety may affect their engagement with language learning tasks (Le, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2023; Thach & Khau, 2025). However, existing research has not sufficiently explained how writing anxiety is experienced by Vietnamese EFL students as a context-sensitive phenomenon. Many studies identify common causes such as grammar, vocabulary, fear of evaluation, and time pressure (Genç & Yayli, 2019), but fewer studies examine how these causes interact with coping practices and classroom conditions. In addition, the rapid growth of AI-assisted writing tools has changed how students experience writing anxiety. Tools such as Grammarly and ChatGPT may reduce anxiety by providing immediate linguistic support, yet they may also create new forms of anxiety related to authorship, dependence, academic integrity, and independent writing ability (Barrot, 2023; Warschauer et al., 2023).

This study addresses these gaps by examining both the factors influencing writing anxiety and the coping strategies used by Vietnamese EFL students from a university in the Mekong Delta context. Rather than treating writing anxiety as only an individual psychological problem, the study views it as a dynamic experience shaped by the interaction of personal, pedagogical, sociocultural, and technological conditions. This perspective is important because some conditions that intensify anxiety may also become resources for managing it. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions:

- 1. What factors influence Vietnamese EFL students' writing anxiety?*
- 2. What strategies do these students use to cope with writing anxiety?*

2. Literature Review

2.1. Anxiety in Second Language Learning

Anxiety is generally understood as a feeling of discomfort, worry, or nervousness that

arises when individuals anticipate negative outcomes. Spielberger (2013) conceptualized anxiety as involving psychological and emotional reactions that may affect behavior and performance. In second language learning, anxiety is not simply a general emotional state. Rather, it is often connected to specific language learning situations in which learners feel uncertain about their competence or fear negative evaluation.

Horwitz (2001) argued that language anxiety involves an inappropriate or excessive emotional response to language learning situations. MacIntyre (1999) defined language anxiety as the negative psychological reactions that occur when learners are required to learn or use a language different from their first language. Although Horwitz emphasizes situation-specific emotional responses to language learning, MacIntyre focuses more on anxiety's interference with cognitive processing and performance. These perspectives are complementary but remain largely individual-centered, offering limited explanation of broader pedagogical, sociocultural, and technological influences. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) further emphasized that language anxiety may interfere with language processing, comprehension, and production. These perspectives suggest that anxiety affects not only how learners feel but also how they think, perform, and participate in language learning.

In writing, anxiety may operate differently from anxiety in speaking or listening because writing requires students to produce extended texts that can be reviewed, evaluated, and compared (Cheng, 2004). Students may therefore worry not only about language errors but also about idea quality, organization, coherence, teacher judgment, peer comparison, and grades. These concerns make writing anxiety a complex construct that requires attention to psychological, pedagogical, and social dimensions.

2.2. Writing Anxiety in EFL Learning

Writing is essential in English language learning since it allows students to express ideas, demonstrate knowledge, and participate in academic communication. Harmer (2004) argued that writing is a complex skill that must be consciously learned and developed. Unlike speaking, which may develop through interaction and exposure, writing requires deliberate attention to form, meaning, organization, and audience. Learners need to draw on vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, coherence, and genre knowledge while also managing the cognitive demands of planning, drafting, revising, and editing (Ali, 2022; Chicho, 2022; Sa'adah, 2020).

Because of these demands, writing can easily become anxiety-provoking for EFL learners. Writing anxiety has been defined as a psychological state characterized by anxious feelings, negative thoughts, and tension during the production of written language (Jawas, 2019). It may arise when learners are required to complete academic tasks such as essays, reports, examinations, or timed compositions. Previous research has shown that writing anxiety may have both facilitative and debilitating effects. Küçük (2023) noted that moderate anxiety may increase alertness in some situations, but excessive anxiety can slow idea generation, reduce confidence, and weaken writing performance. Learners with limited grammar and vocabulary knowledge tend to experience stronger anxiety, especially when writing about unfamiliar topics.

The literature therefore suggests that writing anxiety should not be viewed as a single emotion caused by one factor. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of linguistic difficulty, cognitive overload, self-evaluation, classroom assessment, feedback practices, social comparison, and task conditions (Yu & Zhou, 2022). This interaction is particularly important in EFL contexts, where students often have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom and may evaluate their ability through formal academic performance.

2.3. Factors Influencing EFL Writing Anxiety

Previous studies have identified several sources of EFL writing anxiety. Linguistic limitations are among the most frequently reported sources. Students may become anxious when they lack vocabulary, are unsure about grammar, or cannot express ideas coherently (Daud et al., 2005; Kusumaningputri et al., 2018). Such difficulties can reduce students' sense of control and make writing appear risky. However, linguistic difficulty does not operate alone. It often interacts with cognitive and psychological factors such as self-doubt, perfectionism, fear of failure, and negative self-evaluation. Students who believe that their writing must be error-free may over-monitor their sentences, delay task completion, and become dissatisfied with their own performance (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002; King & Smith, 2017).

Evaluation and feedback also play a central role in writing anxiety. Feedback can help students improve their writing, but it can also become threatening when students perceive it as harsh, vague, public, or judgmental. It is showed that assessment and corrective feedback may influence students' emotional responses to writing (Jennifer & Ponniah, 2017; Liu & Ni, 2015; Tsao et al., 2017). Peer comparison can further intensify anxiety when students interpret others' stronger performance as evidence of their own inadequacy (Zarrinabadi et al., 2024). In contexts where students are concerned about losing face or being judged by classmates, public correction and collective discussion of errors may become especially sensitive.

Task conditions also shape writing anxiety. Timed writing, complex prompts, unclear instructions, and unfamiliar topics can increase pressure because students must manage multiple writing demands within limited time (Genç & Yayli, 2019; Kirmizi & Kirmizi, 2015; Lee, 2003). When task requirements are unclear, students may not know where to begin or how to meet assessment expectations. Task complexity may also increase anxiety because it requires more intensive idea generation, organization, and language production (Wu & Halim, 2024; Zabihi et al., 2020).

Sociocultural factors are equally relevant. In some Asian EFL contexts, students may feel pressure to maintain face, meet family or social expectations, and keep up with peers. Toyama and Yamazaki (2022) suggested that learners from collectivist backgrounds may experience anxiety, embarrassment, or shyness in classroom contexts. Although such cultural explanations should not be overgeneralized, they are useful for understanding why students may hesitate to share writing publicly or feel discouraged when their work appears weaker than that of classmates.

More recently, technological and digital factors have become part of the writing anxiety landscape. Digital tools can reduce anxiety by offering grammar correction, vocabulary suggestions, idea support, and instant feedback (Barrot, 2023; Kurniasih & Saukah, 2021). AI-assisted tools may also increase writing confidence by reducing cognitive load and fear of error (Shen & Tao, 2025). However, digital support may create new concerns. Students may worry about becoming dependent, losing independent writing ability, producing unreliable content, or being suspected of academic dishonesty (Yilmaz & Ustunel, 2025; Yu, 2024; Zahra & Fithriani, 2025). Thus, technology may function both as a coping resource and as a new source of writing anxiety.

2.4. Coping Strategies for Writing Anxiety

Coping strategies refer to the ways learners manage emotional, cognitive, and practical difficulties during writing. Previous studies show that students use a range of strategies, including planning, outlining, positive self-talk, relaxation, peer collaboration, teacher consultation, revision, and technology-supported writing (Afdalia et al., 2023; Jawas, 2019;

Qashoa, 2014). Cognitive and metacognitive strategies help students organize ideas and reduce uncertainty before writing. Planning and outlining are especially useful because they make the task more manageable and reduce pressure during drafting (Yan, 2024; Yunus et al., 2018).

Emotional regulation strategies help students manage the affective side of writing anxiety. These may include taking breaks, writing in a quiet environment, reframing mistakes as part of learning, or using positive self-talk. McGee (2019) suggested that self-encouragement can support writing self-efficacy and confidence (Carroll, 2022). Social strategies are also important. Peer feedback, peer collaboration, and teacher consultation can reduce feelings of isolation and provide direction for revision (Kurniawati & Atmojo, 2022; Rollinson, 2005; Yastibas & Yastibas, 2015). However, the effectiveness of social support depends on how feedback is delivered and interpreted.

Technology-assisted strategies have become increasingly visible. Dictionaries, grammar checkers, and AI tools can help students address vocabulary, grammar, organization, and idea-generation problems. These tools may reduce anxiety by providing immediate assistance, but they should be used critically (Dewi, 2022; Warschauer et al., 2023). If students rely on them without developing independent writing ability, technology may reduce short-term anxiety while increasing long-term insecurity. Therefore, coping with writing anxiety in the digital age requires not only access to tools but also ethical and strategic digital literacy.

2.5. Conceptual Framework

This study draws on Cheng's (2004) L2 Writing Anxiety Framework, which conceptualizes writing anxiety as a multidimensional construct consisting of cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance behavior. Cognitive anxiety refers to worries, negative thoughts, and concerns about writing performance. Somatic anxiety refers to physiological reactions such as tension, nervousness, sweating, or a fast heartbeat. Avoidance behavior refers to reluctance to engage in writing tasks or situations that trigger anxiety.

In the present study, Cheng's framework was used as a sensitizing conceptual lens rather than a rigid coding scheme. Rather than specifying hypotheses, Cheng's (2004) framework oriented both data collection and analysis: its three dimensions informed the interview questions and deductive coding, while inductive coding allowed contextual factors to emerge. However, because the study aimed to explore students' perceived sources of anxiety and coping strategies, the analysis also allowed broader contextual themes to emerge from the data. As a result, the final themes represent not only the psychological manifestations of writing anxiety but also the linguistic, pedagogical, sociocultural, and technological conditions that shaped students' anxious experiences. This flexible use of Cheng's framework is appropriate because writing anxiety is both an internal emotional experience and a socially situated response to writing tasks, feedback, assessment, peer relations, and digital resources. Accordingly, this framework captures cognitive, somatic, and avoidance manifestations of writing anxiety, while linguistic, pedagogical, sociocultural, and technological factors are treated as contextual conditions shaping these responses. Thus, these factors extend rather than replace Cheng's framework.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design to investigate the factors influencing Vietnamese EFL students' writing anxiety and the strategies they used to cope with it. A qualitative approach was appropriate because writing anxiety is psychological, experiential, and context-dependent. It involves students' perceptions, emotions,

interpretations, and responses to specific writing situations, which cannot be adequately understood through numerical measures alone (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Tisdell et al., 2025). In addition, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method. This method allowed the researcher to guide the conversation around predetermined themes while giving participants space to elaborate on their personal experiences, feelings, and coping practices (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The exploratory qualitative design therefore supported an in-depth understanding of how Vietnamese EFL students experienced writing anxiety and how they attempted to manage it.

3.2. Participants

Nine Vietnamese EFL students from a university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, voluntarily participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had relevant experience with English writing. To be eligible, students were required to have completed at least two writing courses in their academic program. This criterion ensured that participants had sufficient exposure to academic writing tasks and could reflect meaningfully on writing anxiety. The participants were between 21 and 22 years old. Given the focused participant criteria and in-depth interviews, the sample was considered adequate for the exploratory qualitative purpose of the study. Later interviews largely repeated previously identified patterns, with no substantially new themes emerging.

3.3. Research Instrument

This study employed semi-structured interviews as the instrument for data collection. To ease the interview process, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed based on Cheng's (2004) framework to explore students' experiences of writing anxiety and coping strategies, particularly questions related to cognitive anxiety, somatic reactions, and avoidance behavior. At the same time, the protocol included broader questions about classroom experiences, feedback, task demands, peer comparison, and digital tools to capture contextual influences.

The protocol contained two main parts. The first part introduced the purpose of the study, explained voluntary participation and confidentiality, and collected background information about students' English learning and writing experiences. The second part included open-ended questions and follow-up probes organized around four areas (i.e., students' understanding and personal experience of writing anxiety; factors that increased or reduced anxiety; strategies used before, during, and after writing; and reflections on changes in anxiety over time). Examples of guiding questions included: "What makes you feel anxious when writing in English?", "How do feedback and assessment affect your writing feelings?", "What do you usually do when you feel anxious before or during a writing task?", "How do digital tools influence your confidence or anxiety in writing?" and the like.

3.4. Data Collection

Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were informed of the research purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, the right to withdraw, the use of audio recording, and measures for confidentiality. A pilot interview was conducted with one Vietnamese EFL student who met the same selection criteria as the main participants. The pilot helped assess the clarity, sequencing, and relevance of the interview questions. After the pilot, only minor adjustments were made to improve the natural flow of probing questions.

The main interviews were conducted individually in a quiet room on the university campus. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and followed the semi-structured protocol. The interview was conducted in Vietnamese, the mother tongue of both the

interviewer and interviewee. This allows the interview to be clear and comprehensive (Creswell, 2012). The researcher used flexible probes to encourage participants to elaborate while keeping the discussion aligned with the research questions. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim in Vietnamese for analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase procedure. First, the researcher familiarized herself with the data by reading and rereading the Vietnamese transcripts. Initial notes were made about repeated ideas, emotional expressions, and descriptions of writing situations. Second, meaningful segments of the transcripts were coded. The coding process combined deductive and inductive approaches. Cheng's (2004) framework sensitized the researcher to cognitive anxiety, somatic anxiety, and avoidance behavior, while the data also generated additional codes related to linguistic difficulty, feedback, time pressure, peer comparison, face concern, and AI-assisted writing. Third, related codes were grouped into candidate themes. For example, codes such as limited vocabulary, grammar uncertainty, sentence construction, and difficulty linking ideas were grouped under linguistic challenges. Codes such as fear of mistakes, perfectionism, grade worry, and negative self-talk were grouped under cognitive and psychological factors. Fourth, the candidate themes were reviewed against the full dataset to ensure that they accurately represented participants' accounts. Fifth, the themes were refined and named to clarify their scope. Finally, the findings were written as an analytical narrative supported by illustrative excerpts. The selected excerpts were translated into English for reporting with a careful check by a qualified translator for their original meanings.

Trustworthiness was supported through repeated engagement with the transcripts, iterative checking of candidate themes against the full dataset, and careful verification of translated excerpts. These procedures were used to enhance the credibility and consistency of the analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Factors Influencing Vietnamese EFL Students' Writing Anxiety

4.1.1. Linguistic Challenges

All participants identified linguistic challenges as a major source of writing anxiety. Vocabulary was especially salient because students worried that they could not select words accurately or express meanings precisely. Participant 1 explained that *"English synonyms and near-synonyms made my writing difficult because many words could not fully replace one another"*. This uncertainty made the participant anxious about whether the chosen words were appropriate. In addition, English grammar also created some anxiety. For instance, Participant 2 stated that *"[...] my limited grammar knowledge made me afraid to reread my writing because I felt the text contained many mistakes and was not clear or convincing enough"*.

While previous studies link limited language proficiency to writing apprehension (Daud et al., 2005; Kusumaningputri et al., 2018), the present findings further suggest that linguistic difficulties may intensify self-doubt and anticipated negative evaluation. It affected students' confidence, willingness to revise, and anticipation of evaluation. When students doubted their vocabulary or grammar, they became more likely to expect negative feedback and judge their writing as weak before others evaluated it.

The findings also reveal that students reported difficulty organizing and connecting ideas. Participant 1 shared: *"Anxiety made it difficult for me to form complete sentences,*

choose suitable words, and organize my ideas clearly, so my writing often became confusing and less coherent than I expected." In a similar vein, Participant 7 worried about arranging sentences naturally and coherently, expressing that, *"I was not only worried about grammar but also about how to arrange my sentences naturally. Sometimes my ideas were there, but the writing did not flow coherently"*. This finding supports Chicho's (2022) argument that problems with expressing and connecting ideas can intensify anxious behaviors in writing. In the present study, coherence and cohesion were not separate from anxiety. Rather, students' concern about coherence increased their sense that writing was difficult to control.

4.1.2. Cognitive and Psychological Pressures

Cognitive and psychological pressures also contributed strongly to writing anxiety. Several participants described perfectionism, repeated self-checking, and fear of producing imperfect writing. Participant 1, for instance, explained: *"I always wanted my sentences to be grammatically correct and my vocabulary choices to be accurate, so I checked them again and again because I was afraid small mistakes would weaken my writing"*. This form of perfectionism had a dual role. It motivated students to improve their writing, but it also increased pressure, self-criticism, and dissatisfaction. Consistent with previous research, but extending it to EFL writing, perfectionism appeared to be double-edged, encouraging improvement while increasing anxiety, self-criticism, and delayed writing (Barabadi et al., 2023; Besser et al., 2020; Chasetareh et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2022; Tao et al., 2025). It also made feedback more emotionally sensitive.

The findings additionally indicate that negative thoughts before and during writing were also common. Students worried about whether they could complete the task, what grade they would receive, or whether they might fail the course (Students 2 and 5). Some students felt anxious because *"I did not know how to begin an introduction or develop my ideas clearly, so I often felt stuck before writing and became unsure about what to write next."* (Participant 7). These findings reflect Cheng's (2002) claim that confidence and self-assurance are central to L2 writing anxiety. They also support studies showing that idea generation, self-doubt, and grade-related worry are significant sources of anxiety (Genç & Yayli, 2019; Ippun et al., 2023; Jia, 2024; Paramarti et al., 2023; Yan, 2024; Zhao et al., 2019).

4.1.3. Evaluation and Feedback-Related Pressure

The findings show that evaluation and feedback were powerful influences on writing anxiety. All participants indicated that teachers' comments, grades, and peer responses could shape how they felt about writing. To illustrate, Participant 5, for instance, said: *"I feared that my classmates would think my writing was poor, simple, or not worth reading, and that my teachers would judge it negatively because of my grammar mistakes and weak ideas."* Similarly, Participant 2 stated that: *"[...] negative teacher feedback made me feel that I had many weaknesses and was criticized more than appreciated"*. These findings support previous research showing that feedback and assessment practices can influence students' emotional responses to writing (Jennifer & Ponniah, 2017; Liu & Ni, 2015; Tsao et al., 2017). However, the present study adds that feedback was experienced through students' expectations of judgment. Students did not only react to actual comments; they anticipated criticism before receiving it. This anticipation intensified cognitive anxiety and sometimes made students reluctant to share their work.

Furthermore, peer comparison also increased anxiety. Some participants compared their writing with classmates' writing and interpreted lower grades or weaker performance as evidence of personal inadequacy. Participant 6 expressed: *"Receiving a lower grade than my peers reduced my confidence because it made me feel that my writing ability was weaker and*

that I could not meet the teacher's expectations". This finding resonates with Zarrinabadi et al. (2024), who found that learners' beliefs about ability may shape emotional reactions to competition and comparison. In the present study, comparison was particularly anxiety-provoking when students believed that their peers wrote more easily or naturally.

4.1.4. Time and Task Demands

Time pressure was one of the most frequently reported anxiety triggers. Eight participants stated that tight deadlines or timed writing made them anxious. Participant 1, for instance, described physical reactions such as *"When deadlines approached, I often felt my heart beating fast, my hands shaking, and my body sweating because I was afraid I could not finish the writing task well."* Similarly, Participant 3 felt that, *"Time pressure prevented me from writing carefully because I had to finish quickly, so I could not plan my ideas, check my grammar, or revise my writing thoroughly."* These narratives reflect both somatic and cognitive anxiety, showing that time pressure affected students physically and mentally. This finding is consistent with Kirmizi and Kirmizi's (2015) conclusion that time pressure is an influential source of writing anxiety. It also supports Genç and Yaylı's (2019) argument that writers need time to plan, draft, revise, and refine their texts. When students perceive time is insufficient, they may lose their sense of control and view the task as unmanageable.

Unclear instructions and task complexity also intensified anxiety. All participants emphasized that vague instructions made it difficult to start writing or stay on topic. Participant 1, for instance, stated: *"Unclear instructions made me feel confused and unsure about where to begin, because I did not fully understand the topic, requirements, or what the teacher expected from my writing."* In a similar vein, Participant 2 said that, *"Unclear prompts led me to revise my writing many times and wasted a lot of time because I was unsure whether my ideas matched the topic and requirements."* Complex tasks further challenged confidence, particularly when students felt that task requirements exceeded their language ability. These findings align with research showing that task complexity can increase nervousness and reduce writing performance (Qashoa, 2014; Wu & Halim, 2024; Zabihi et al., 2020). In this study, it shows that task difficulty was anxiety-provoking not only because of language demands but also because students were uncertain about expectations.

4.1.5. Social and Cultural Expectations

Social and cultural expectations appeared in participants' accounts, although less frequently than linguistic, evaluative, and task-related factors. Four participants referred to face-related concerns. Participant 1 stated that: *"The fear of losing face was real and that I felt nervous about others judging my writing"*. Participant 7 said: *"I worried about losing face in front of my classmates, and this made me hesitate to share my writing because I was afraid they would notice my mistakes and judge me negatively."* These findings suggest that public exposure of writing may be emotionally sensitive in contexts where students are concerned about social image and peer judgment. The findings are consistent with Gao's (2025) discussion of face-saving concerns in L2 activities and with research showing that peer feedback may reduce anxiety when conducted supportively (Kurt & Atay, 2007; Rollinson, 2005). In the present study, students felt more motivated when public comments were positive, but they feared embarrassment when their mistakes were visible to others. This suggests that social context influences not only whether students participate but also how they interpret feedback.

The findings show that two participants mentioned collectivist expectations, especially the desire to keep up with classmates. Participant 6 felt *"the need to improve writing to be on par with peers"*, while Participant 9 worried about *"falling behind"*. These accounts partially

support Toyama and Yamazaki's (2022) claim that collectivist orientations may be associated with classroom anxiety. However, because only a few participants discussed this factor, the finding should be interpreted cautiously. In this study, sociocultural expectations were present but less dominant than immediate classroom and task-related pressures.

4.1.6. Technological and Digital Factors

Digital tools, especially AI-assisted writing tools, played a complex role in students' writing anxiety. Six participants reported that tools such as Grammarly and ChatGPT helped reduce anxiety by supporting grammar, vocabulary, and idea generation. Sharing this view, Participant 1 said: *"ChatGPT helped my worry less about grammar and vocabulary"*, while Participant 3 said that *"[...] digital tools improved my confidence in grammar"*. These responses suggest that technology may reduce cognitive load and fear of error.

However, it is interesting to note that eight participants expressed concerns about using AI tools. To illustrate, Participant 1 worried that *"I worried that teachers might suspect me of using AI even when the writing was completely my own, and this made me feel nervous about submitting my work or explaining how I developed my ideas."* Sharing the same view, Participant 4 feared *"becoming unable to write independently without AI support, especially in in-class tests"*. These concerns reveal new forms of writing anxiety related to authorship, dependence, academic integrity, and independent performance. This finding is one of the study's most important contributions. Previous research has shown that AI tools may lower writing anxiety and increase confidence (Shen & Tao, 2025), but also that excessive dependence may reduce autonomy and create uncertainty about originality (Yilmaz & Ustunel, 2025; Yu, 2024; Zahra & Fithriani, 2025). The present study supports both perspectives. AI-assisted tools functioned as immediate coping resources, but they also generated longer-term anxiety when students questioned whether their writing ability was genuinely improving. This suggests that writing anxiety in contemporary EFL contexts increasingly includes technological and ethical dimensions.

It should be noted that these above mentioned factors did not operate independently. Linguistic difficulties could increase self-doubt and perfectionism, while unclear tasks and peer comparison could intensify fear of evaluation. Similarly, AI tools could reduce linguistic anxiety but create concerns about dependence and originality. Thus, writing anxiety appeared to emerge from interacting rather than isolated factors. Furthermore, The Mekong Delta context may help explain these findings. English is increasingly important for study and employment in the region (Yen, 2022), while opportunities for using English beyond the classroom may remain limited (Vo et al., 2018). These conditions may heighten linguistic insecurity and evaluation concerns while increasing students' reliance on feedback and digital tools for support.

4.2. Strategies Used by Students to Cope with Writing Anxiety

4.2.1. Cognitive and Metacognitive Strategies

Students commonly used cognitive and metacognitive strategies to manage anxiety. Planning and outlining were especially useful because they helped students organize ideas before writing. Participant 6 stated: *"You know, preparation helped me control my anxiety because planning gave me a clear direction, helped me organize my ideas, and made me feel more confident before starting the writing task"*. Similarly, Participant 1 said: *"I think that making an outline reduced worry about ideas during writing"*. These strategies gave students a sense of control and reduced cognitive overload. This finding supports Yan's (2024) argument that planning and outlining are important for novice academic writers. It also aligns

with Yunus et al. (2018), who emphasized the value of pre-writing activities. In the present study, planning was not only a writing strategy but also an emotional support mechanism. By creating an outline, students reduced uncertainty and made writing feel more manageable.

The findings also reveal that one participant described “*breaking writing tasks into smaller parts, such as writing a few sentences or one paragraph at a time*” (Participant 3). Although this strategy was not widely reported, it appeared effective in reducing mental overload. It also suggests a practical pedagogical implication, saying that teachers can help anxious writers by dividing writing tasks into staged steps rather than expecting them to produce complete texts immediately.

4.2.2. Emotional Regulation Strategies

The findings show that students also used emotional regulation strategies to reduce anxiety. Some participants mentioned relaxation, quiet writing environments, and short breaks. Participant 8, for instance, said: “*I preferred writing in a calm place rather than a noisy environment because silence helped me concentrate better, organize my ideas more clearly, avoid distractions, and feel more relaxed and less anxious while writing*”. Others used positive self-talk as a supporting technique. Participant 1 reminded herself to “*write first and fix mistakes later*”, while Participant 9 “*tried to maintain a positive attitude before writing because it helped me feel calmer, believe that I could complete the task, and reduce the fear of making mistakes*”. These strategies show that students were not passive victims of anxiety. They actively attempted to regulate their emotions and maintain focus. The findings align with research showing that relaxation, self-encouragement, and positive thinking can help students cope with academic stress (Afdalia et al., 2023; Carroll, 2022; Jawas, 2019; McGee, 2019; Talasee & Poopatwiboon, 2024). In this study, positive self-talk was particularly important because it challenged students’ perfectionistic tendency to avoid writing until they felt ready.

4.2.3. Social and Resource-based Strategies

It is interesting to note that many participants sought support from friends and teachers. Six participants reported asking peers or teachers for feedback. Participant 1, for instance asked friends for feedback or encouragement, expressing that “*To be motivated and encouraging, I intentionally asked my classmates for their feedback. I believe that with their feedback, I can do better*”, while Participant 2 felt that, “[...] *Peer comments helped me correct my mistakes more quickly, even when they were slightly painful to hear, because they showed me problems I had not noticed in my own writing.*” Peer collaboration also helped students generate ideas and recognize common errors.

Teacher consultation was another important strategy. Participants valued teachers’ suggested structures, vocabulary lists, and constructive feedback. They felt less anxious when teachers provided clear guidance and helped them understand how to improve. These findings support previous research showing that peer collaboration and teacher feedback can reduce writing anxiety when delivered in a supportive manner (Gibriel, 2019; Jawas, 2019; Kurniawati & Atmojo, 2022; Qashoa, 2014; Yastibas & Yastibas, 2015). However, the findings also show that social support is double-edged. Peer feedback can reduce anxiety when it is constructive, but it can intensify anxiety when students fear judgment. Teacher feedback can guide improvement, but it can discourage students when perceived as overly negative. Therefore, the effectiveness of social support depends on the quality of classroom interaction and feedback culture.

4.2.4. Technology-assisted Strategies

The findings show that many participants used digital tools such as dictionaries,

grammar checkers, and AI assistants to support writing. These tools helped students address vocabulary and grammar uncertainty, generate ideas, and feel more confident. Participant 2 shared: *“I felt relieved after using AI to check my writing because it helped me identify grammar mistakes, improve word choices, and feel more confident before submitting my work.”*, while Participant 3 used AI for *“relevant vocabulary and grammar suggestions”*. This finding aligns with studies showing that technology can support writing by providing immediate feedback and reducing fear of error (Barrot, 2023; Kurniasih et al., 2023; Kurniasih & Saukah, 2021). In the present study, technology-assisted strategies were particularly useful because they allowed students to manage anxiety independently before seeking human feedback. However, students’ concerns about AI dependence suggest that technology should be integrated with explicit instruction on ethical and strategic use. Teachers should help students use AI as a learning support, not as a substitute for independent writing development.

4.2.5. Growth and Reflective Strategies

Students also coped with anxiety through repeated practice and reflection. Five students reported that continued exposure to writing tasks helped them become more confident. Participant 1 shared: *“I felt less scared after taking more writing courses and learning more vocabulary and sentence structures because I understood how to express my ideas more clearly and accurately.”* In a similar vein, Participant 4 stated: *“It’s true that writing continuously helped me gradually become used to it, because regular practice made writing feel less frightening, improved my confidence, and helped me handle writing tasks more calmly over time”*. One participant practiced writing under time pressure to become more familiar with examination conditions. These findings suggest that writing anxiety can decrease when students gain experience and reinterpret earlier difficulties as part of learning. Repeated writing practice may help students build familiarity, confidence, and tolerance for pressure (Kaplan et al., 2025). Reflective engagement with previous writing experiences may also help students recognize progress and develop more adaptive attitudes (Ghane et al., 2024). Importantly, growth-oriented coping strategies address long-term development rather than only immediate anxiety relief.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study explored the factors influencing Vietnamese EFL students’ writing anxiety and the strategies they used to cope with it. The findings show that writing anxiety was shaped by six interrelated groups of factors. They include linguistic challenges, cognitive and psychological pressures, evaluation and feedback, time and task demands, social and cultural expectations, and technological and digital factors. These factors were not isolated. Linguistic insecurity could intensify fear of feedback; unclear task requirements could increase self-doubt; peer comparison could reinforce negative self-evaluation; and AI-assisted writing tools could reduce immediate anxiety while creating new concerns about dependence and originality.

The findings also show that students used multiple coping strategies, including planning, outlining, emotional regulation, peer and teacher support, technology-assisted strategies, and reflective practice. A central contribution of the study is the finding that some factors functioned both as anxiety triggers and coping resources. Feedback, peer interaction, time pressure, and AI tools did not have fixed effects. Their influence depended on how students experienced, interpreted, and used them. This suggests that writing anxiety should be understood as dynamic and context-sensitive rather than as a purely individual psychological problem.

Theoretically, the findings extend Cheng’s (2004) framework by showing that

contextual factors are not simply fixed sources of anxiety. Feedback, peer interaction, time pressure, and AI tools could function as both anxiety triggers and coping resources depending on how students interpreted and used them. This dual role suggests that writing anxiety is dynamic and relational, shaped by interactions between individual responses and contextual conditions.

Several pedagogical implications can be drawn from the findings. First, teachers should provide clear writing prompts, assessment criteria, and examples so that students understand task expectations before writing. Second, writing instruction should be staged through brainstorming, outlining, drafting, peer review, revision, and reflection. Such staging can reduce cognitive overload and make writing more manageable. Third, feedback should be specific, constructive, private when appropriate, and focused on improvement rather than judgment. Teachers should avoid public critique that may increase students' fear of losing face. Fourth, peer feedback should be carefully structured so that students learn how to give respectful and useful comments. Fifth, timed writing should be introduced gradually to help students build confidence under pressure. Finally, students should be taught how to use AI-assisted writing tools ethically and strategically. AI should be framed as a learning aid that supports idea development, language checking, and revision, but students also need opportunities to write independently without digital support.

Notably, the study has several limitations. First, it involved only nine participants from one university, which limits the transferability of the findings. Second, the study relied on self-reported interview data and did not include writing samples, classroom observations, or teachers' perspectives. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as participants' perceived experiences rather than as triangulated accounts of actual classroom practices. Third, participant demographic information was limited, making it difficult to compare anxiety across proficiency levels, gender, achievement, or digital literacy. Fourth, the study was cross-sectional and therefore could not fully examine how writing anxiety and coping strategies changed over time. Finally, although AI-assisted writing emerged as an important theme, this area remains relatively new and requires further investigation. Future research should address these limitations by involving larger and more diverse samples across Vietnamese EFL contexts and, where appropriate, incorporating quantitative measures to complement interview data. To reduce reliance on self-report, future studies could combine interviews with writing samples or classroom observations, while longitudinal designs could examine changes in anxiety and coping over time. Further research should also examine how AI use relates to anxiety, autonomy, and independent writing development.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT in order to assist with language revision. The authors then reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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